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RIGHT TO VOTE



Democrats use state voting laws to fuel federal overhaul

In this Oct. 12, 2020, file photo, people wait in line for early voting at the Bell Auditorium in Augusta, Ga.

Associated Press
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Democrats use state voting laws to fuel federal overhaul

By STEVE PEOPLES and
LISA MASCARO
Associated Press

Democrats on Friday seized on new voting restrictions in Georgia to focus attention on the fight to overhaul federal election laws, setting up a slow-building standoff that carries echoes of the civil rights battles of a half-century ago.

In fiery speeches, pointed statements and tweets, party leaders decried the law signed Thursday by the state's Republican governor as specifically aimed at suppressing Black and Latino votes and a threat to democracy. President Joe Biden released an extended statement, calling the law an attack on "good conscience" that denies the right to vote for "countless" Americans.

"This is Jim Crow in the 21st Century," Biden said, referring to laws of the last century that enforced heavy-handed racial segregation in the South. "It must end. We have a moral and Constitutional obligation to act." He told reporters the Georgia law is an "atrocious" and the Justice Department is looking into it.

Georgia's Republican governor, Brian Kemp, lashed back, accusing Biden of attempting to "destroy the sanctity and security of the ballot box" by supporting what the governor sees as federal intrusion into state responsibilities.

Behind the chorus of outrage, Democrats are also wrestling with the limits on their power in Washington, as long as Senate filibuster rules allow Republicans to block major legislation, including H.R.1, a sweeping elections bill now pending in the Senate.

Biden and his party are seeking to build and sustain momentum in the realm of public opinion — hoping to nationalize what has so far been a Republican-led state-by-state movement to curb access to the ballot — while they begin a slow, plodding legislative process. Allies meanwhile plan to fight the Georgia law, and others, in court.

"What's happening in Geor-



Rep. Park Cannon (D-Atlanta) is placed in handcuffs by Georgia State Troopers after being asked to stop knocking on a door that lead to Gov. Brian Kemp's office while Gov. Kemp was signing SB 202 behind closed doors at the Georgia State Capitol Building in Atlanta, Thursday, March 25, 2021.

Associated Press

gia right now, underscores the importance and the urgency," said Sen. Rev. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., in an interview Friday.

"This is about what is fundamental to our identity as an American people — one person, one vote."

The emerging brawl over the politics and policy of voting access is swelling like nothing seen in recent years, harkening back to what many Americans may assume are well-settled rules ensuring equal access to the ballot.

But as Republican-controlled state legislatures from Georgia to Iowa to Arizona are taking dramatic action to limit early voting and force new voter ID requirements, the debate in Washington threatens to exacerbate the nation's cavernous political divides in the early days of the Biden presidency, just as the Democratic president vows to unite the country.

It is expected to be a months-long slog in the narrowly divided Congress, specifically the Senate, where Democrats are, for now, unwilling to muscle their slim majority to change filibuster rules, despite the party's urgent calls for action.

Instead, the Democrats are prepared to legislate

the old-fashioned way, unspooling arguments in lengthy Senate debates, spilling out of the committee hearing rooms and onto the Senate floor, and forcing opponents to go on the record as standing in the way — much as South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond was positioned when he filibustered the Civil Rights Act of the last century. Booker would not, however, openly call for the end of the filibuster, a parliamentary tool requiring at least 60 votes to advance Senate legislation in some cases.

On Friday, the president revived his call on Congress to enact H.R. 1, a voting overhaul that would overturn the Republican restrictions. He called as well for the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would restore some aspects of a landmark law struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013.

But Biden, like a shrinking number of other powerful Democrats, remains unwilling to embrace the so-called "nuclear option" — ending the filibuster — for fear it would further divide the country.

Meantime, the political fight was intensifying in Georgia, where years of voter registration drives in

Black communities and steady population changes helped Biden win the once solidly red state.

Just as the Gov. Brian Kemp and several white state lawmakers celebrated the signing of the state's new voting law on Thursday, state police officers handcuffed and forcibly removed state Rep. Park Cannon, a Black woman, after she knocked on the door of the governor's private office.

Cannon was charged with obstruction of law enforcement and disruption of the General Assembly, both felonies. She was released from jail late Thursday. Donald Trump, the former president who promoted false claims of election fraud, congratulated the Georgia governor and state leaders on the new law.

As Congress hunkers down for the fight, a groundswell of outside efforts is spending millions to try to influence the debate and apply political pressure on voters, corporations and lawmakers in both parties. A \$30 million advertising campaign is coming from the liberal group, End Citizens United, working with former Attorney General Eric Holder's anti-gerrymandering group, the National Democratic Redistricting

Committee, trying to persuade Democratic and Republican senators considered to be swing votes.

Other efforts are also underway, including from former first lady Michelle Obama, via the nonpartisan celebrity "When We All Vote" organization.

Civil rights leader Al Sharpton said Friday that he's working with religious leaders in West Virginia and Arizona to press the home-state Democratic senators. He's well aware that this fight may go on for a while. "I'm prepared to go on this fight for however long it takes," he said. "Look at how long it took us to get the right to vote."

Sharpton also suggested that Black voters have been energized by the debate, which could lead to a surge in participation in next year's midterm elections despite the new voting requirements enacted by Republicans.

"By them being so blatant, I think that they play into our national strategy," Sharpton said. "We just need the Democrats in the Senate to stand up."

The Georgia law requires a photo ID in order to vote absentee by mail, cuts the time people have to request an absentee ballot and limits where ballot drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. The bill was a watered-down version of some of the proposals considered by the GOP-led General Assembly.

Still, Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison warned his party would take Republicans to court "and fight about it there." A lawsuit filed late Thursday in the U.S. District Court in Atlanta by three groups — New Georgia Project, Black Voters Matter Fund and Rise — challenged key provisions of the new law and said they violated the Voting Rights Act.

But Harrison also acknowledged that the filibuster was an "an obstacle" for the national Democrats' efforts to overturn the Republican-backed changes. □

The eviction moratorium is expiring. What will Biden do?

By ASHRAF KHALIL and MICHAEL CASEY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration has less than a week to decide on extending the nationwide eviction moratorium, a measure that housing advocates say has helped keep most cash-strapped tenants across the country in their homes during the pandemic.

Housing advocates are confident the ban, due to expire March 31, will be extended for several months and possibly even strengthened. Still, they argue the existing moratorium hasn't been a blanket protection and say thousands of families have been evicted for other reasons beyond non-payment of rent.

"The key to restoring and strengthening our economy is defeating COVID-19. To do that, we must keep people safely housed as we work towards vaccinating more people. This is what the American Rescue Plan does," Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., said in a statement. "But for now, an extension of the moratorium is clearly warranted until more people are vaccinated, more supportive housing programs come on line, and more help is deployed."

The White House has indicated it is weighing an extension of the ban. The Department of Housing and



In this Jan. 13, 2021, file photo, tenants' rights advocates demonstrate in front of the Edward W. Brooke Courthouse in Boston.

Associated Press

Urban Development did not respond to a request for comment on the issue. Eric Dunn, director of litigation for the National Housing Law Project, noted signs that a decision has already quietly been made. Last week, Dunn said, a HUD official conducted a call with housing advocates to field opinions on a new, streamlined form that tenants can use in order to gain protection from eviction.

"Why would they be doing that if they didn't plan to continue this for a while longer?" Dunn asked. "The question is: What is the extension going to look like?"

Dunn and others would like to see the moratorium extended and improved. Last week, more than 2,000 advocacy organizations signed on to a letter to Biden and new HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge urging them to extend the ban via executive order and also "address the moratorium's shortcomings by improving and enforcing the order." Implemented in September by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, President Donald Trump's directive was extended until the end of January. Biden extended it until March 31.

The rationale for the moratorium was that having families lose their homes and move into shelters or share crowded conditions with relatives or friends during a pandemic would further spread the highly contagious coronavirus. To be eligible for protection, renters must earn \$198,000 or less for couples filing jointly, or \$99,000 for single filers; demonstrate that they've sought government help to pay the rent; declare that they can't pay because of COVID-19 hardships; and affirm they are likely to become homeless if evicted. Biden's \$1.9 trillion CO-

VID-19 relief package included more than \$25 billion in emergency rental assistance, plus more to help tenants who were behind on their utilities, but no extension of the eviction moratorium.

And while that money works its way out to citizens, the need for relief remains dire.

John Pollock, coordinator of the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel, said current surveys show that 18.4% of all tenants owe back rent. That number also revealed significant racial disparity; the percentage of Black tenants behind on their rent was 32.9%.

Pollack called the ban "the only thing holding back the flood" of evictions that would spiral through the still shaky American economy. "That kind of wave won't just affect the renters themselves; it will devastate communities, much as the 2008 mortgage foreclosure crisis did," he said.

But simply extending the moratorium is not enough, advocates said.

One of the biggest changes being advocated is for Biden to make the ban's protection's automatic and universal. Currently, tenants have to take active steps to invoke the ban's protections — which leads to exploitation of the uniformed.□

Kenosha police: 55 more charged for violence during protests

KENOSHA, Wis. (AP) — Fifty-five people are facing charges related to violent demonstrations in Kenosha, Wisconsin, following the police shooting of Jacob Blake last summer, police said Friday.

Kenosha Officer Rusten Sheskey shot Blake seven times in August during a domestic dispute, leaving him paralyzed. Blake, who is Black, was holding a pocketknife that had fallen from his pocket during a scuffle with police. Sheskey has not been charged, but Blake filed a civil lawsuit this

week accusing him of using excessive force.

The shooting, captured on bystander video, turned the nation's spotlight on Wisconsin during a summer marked by nationwide protests against police brutality and racism. The violent protests in Kenosha lasted for several nights.

"Large numbers of people engaged in lawful protest; however, many engaged in unlawful and dangerous activity," Kenosha Police Chief Daniel Miskinis said in a statement.

An Illinois teenager is facing

multiple charges, including two homicide counts. Kyle Rittenhouse of Antioch is accused of opening fire on protesters with an AR-15-style rifle, killing two people and injuring a third. According to prosecutors, Rittenhouse said he traveled to Kenosha on Aug. 25 to protect businesses from protesters.

Black Lives Matter supporters have painted him as a trigger-happy white supremacist. Rittenhouse argues he was attacked and fired in self-defense. Miskinis said 49 adults and



In this Aug. 24, 2020, file photo, protesters walk past police with their arms up, in Kenosha, Wis., as a building burns in the background.

Associated Press

six minors are facing charges including arson, burglary, possession of a firearm or ammunition by a convicted felon, criminal damage and disorderly conduct. He said 35 of those charged are Kenosha residents. The new tally did not include Rittenhouse.□



Residents survey damage to homes after a tornado touched down south of Birmingham, Ala. in the Eagle Point community damaging multiple homes, Thursday, March 25, 2021.

Associated Press

Alabama, Georgia, pick up the pieces after deadly tornadoes

By KIM CHANDLER and ANILA YOGANATHAN

Associated Press

NEWNAN, Ga. (AP) —

Chainsaws buzzed through fallen trees, stunned residents dug in the rubble that had been their homes, and neighbors rushed in to help on Friday after multiple tornadoes ripped a path of devastation across the Deep South. At least five people were killed.

As many as 10 tornadoes — an estimated eight in Alabama and two in Georgia — carved a tremendous path of devastation on Thursday, uprooting 100-year-old trees, stripping roofs from houses, seriously damaging schools and businesses, and scattering treasured family possessions far and wide.

All of the twisters were spawned by "supercell" thunderstorms, said John De Block, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Birmingham.

In the western Georgia town of Newnan on Friday, among several communities west of Atlanta walloped by the storms, the smell of pine and the whir of electric saws filled the neighborhood as volunteers lugging their own tools helped carve up fallen trees.

Charlene Watson's apartment building was ripped

apart by the tornado. She awoke to sirens and moved as quickly as she could to the basement of her building before the twister tore the roof off her building. Her son, Shawn Menard, waded through the debris, collecting the crosses that had lined Watson's bedroom wall before it was ripped off and any other family mementos that could be salvaged.

"Just be thankful for everything you've got, because you are not promised the next day. Nothing is," Watson said, holding back tears.

One person died overnight of a medical emergency, said Deputy Chief of Police Mark Cooper, although it wasn't immediately clear if the death was connected to the tornado. The person's name was not released as officials tried to notify family members. The Red Cross was trying to find hotels for 15 people who had fled to emergency shelters.

Officials found "heavy, heavy damage" in parts of the city's historic district, Newnan Fire Chief Stephen Brown told a news conference.

In Alabama, one of the twisters formed in the southwestern part of the state then carved up ground for more than an hour and traveled about 100 miles

(160 kilometers) causing heavy damage in the city of Centreville, south of Tuscaloosa.

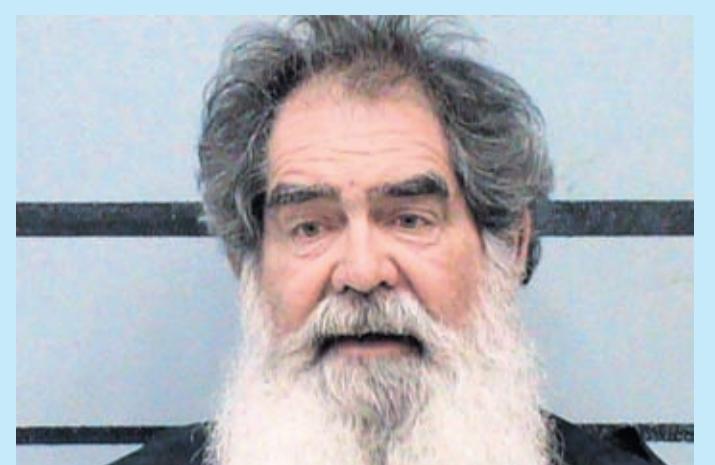
De Block said the tornado dissipated in Shelby County, where another twister had already heavily damaged homes and businesses and devastated the landscape. The county is home to suburban Birmingham cities such as Pelham and Helena and the unincorporated subdivision of Eagle Point — all of which suffered heavy damage.

Larry and Mary Rose DeArman sheltered in a basement closet as the tornado slammed into their Eagle Point house, collapsing it into a pile of bricks.

"I could see the house splitting apart. ... could see the sky, and then debris hit me in the head," said Mary Rose, 69.

Neighbors lowered ladders into the basement so that the DeArmans could climb out. They both escaped serious injuries. County Coroner Pat Brown identified them Friday as Joe Wayne Harris, 74; Barbara Harris, 69; Ebonique Harris, 28; Emily Myra Wilborn, 72; and James William Geno, 72, Al.com reported.

"For those families, it will never be the same," Calhoun County Sheriff Matthew Wade said at briefing Thursday evening.



This undated photo provided by Lubbock County (Texas) Sheriff's Office shows Larry Lee Harris.

Associated Press

Feds charge Arizona man in National Guard holdup in Texas

LUBBOCK, Texas (AP) — Federal prosecutors have charged an Arizona man accused of forcing off the road a National Guard convoy transporting COVID-19 vaccines in West Texas, then holding 11 guard members at gunpoint.

Larry Lee Harris, 66, of Willcox, Arizona, has been charged with assaulting a federal officer with a deadly weapon, federal prosecutors announced in a statement Friday. He already faced state charges of aggravated assault, unlawful restraint, impersonating a public servant, unlawfully carrying a weapon, and interfering with military forces.

Conviction on the federal charge is punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

The incident happened Monday in Idalou, Texas, about 12 miles (19 kilometers) northeast of Lubbock. Police say Harris followed the three National Guard vans from a gas station and tried multiple times to run them off the roadway before turning his vehicle into oncoming traffic to block their progress. He pointed a gun at a soldier, identified himself as a detective and demanded to search the vehicles.

He told officers that he stopped the vans because he believed people inside them had kidnapped a woman and child, authorities said. Police say Harris had three loaded guns.

He remained in the Lubbock County Detention Center on Friday pending an initial appearance in federal court. That appearance has not been scheduled yet. Jail records list no attorney for Harris. □

One of the victims in the hard-hit town of Ohatchee, a small community of about 1,170 people in eastern Alabama, was Dwight Jennings' neighbor, Geno went by J.W. and had been a rodeo bull rider in his youth. He could make anything out of wood, and loved to angle for catfish, Jennings said. The two of them had planned to go fishing this weekend. Jennings spent hours searching for Geno's dog. The animal was found alive. Bad weather wasn't limited to Georgia and Alabama. Officials warned of strong thunderstorms and potential flooding across the southern U.S., including in parts of Tennessee, Kentucky and the Carolinas. Emergency responders hospitalized one person in Sumner County, Tennessee, and the Nashville Fire Department posted photos on Twitter showing large trees down, damaged homes and streets blocked by debris. Thousands of customers remained without electricity in Alabama, according to poweroutage.us. □

China outlines COVID-origin findings, ahead of WHO report

By KEN MORITSUGU

Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese officials briefed diplomats Friday on the ongoing research into the origin of COVID-19, ahead of the expected release of a long-awaited report from the World Health Organization.

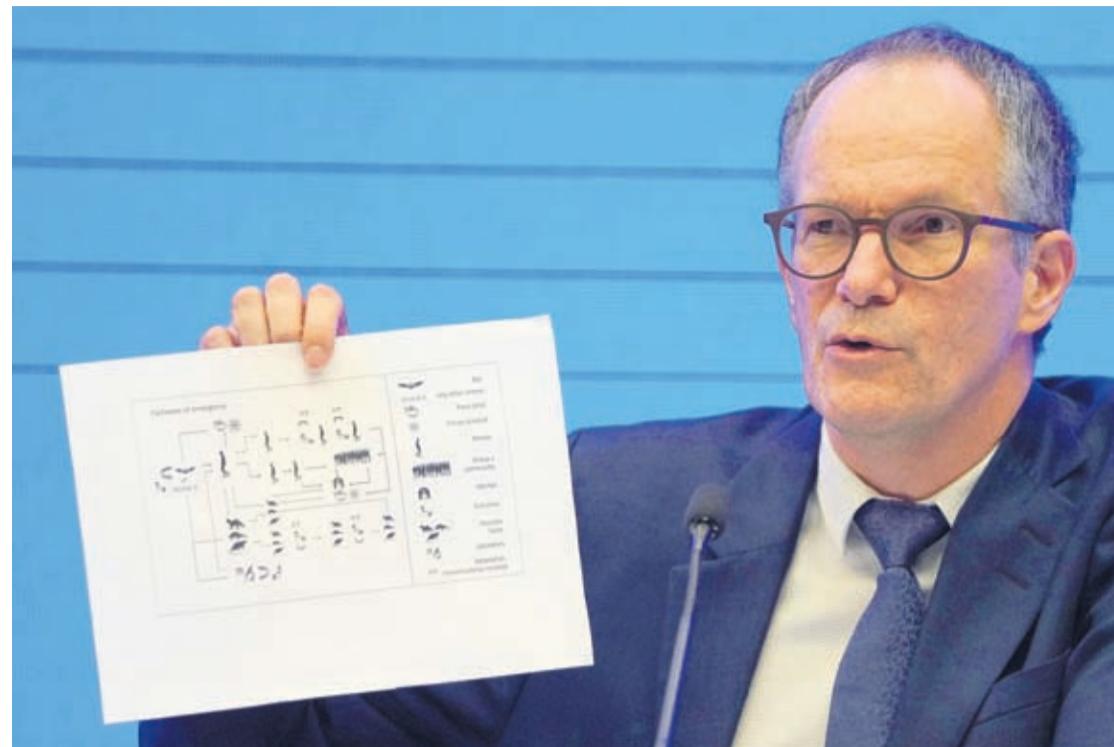
The briefing appeared to be an attempt by China to get out its view on the report, which has become enmeshed in a diplomatic spat.

The U.S. and others have raised questions about Chinese influence and the independence of the findings, and China has accused critics of politicizing a scientific study.

"Our purpose is to show our openness and transparency," said Yang Tao, a Foreign Ministry official. "China fought the epidemic in a transparent manner and has nothing to hide."

The report, which has been delayed repeatedly, is based on a visit earlier this year by a WHO team of international experts to Wuhan, the city in central China where infections from a new coronavirus were first reported in late 2019.

The experts worked with Chinese counterparts, and both sides have to agree on the final report. It's unclear when it will come out.



In this Feb. 9, 2021, file photo, Peter Ben Embarek of the World Health Organization team holds up a chart showing pathways of transmission of the virus during a joint press conference held at the end of the WHO mission in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province.

Associated Press

Feng Zijian, a Chinese team member and the deputy director of China's Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said the experts examined four possible ways the virus got to Wuhan.

They are: a bat carrying the virus infected a human, a bat infected an intermediate mammal that spread it to a human, shipments of cold or frozen food, and a laboratory that researches viruses in Wuhan.

The experts voted on the hypotheses after in-depth

discussion and concluded one of the two animal routes or the cold chain was most likely how it was transmitted. A lab leak was viewed as extremely unlikely, Feng said.

His remarks were reported by state broadcaster CCTV, which said envoys from 50 countries and the League of Arab States and the African Union attended the briefing at the Foreign Ministry.

"China firmly opposes certain countries' attempts to politicize the origin tracing

issue and make groundless accusations and hold China accountable," the ministry said in an online post about the briefing.

Separately, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said, "I would like to stress that virus tracing is a scientific issue that should be studied by scientists through cooperation."

She told reporters that the experts are still discussing the contents and translation of the report, and she did not know when it would be released.

At a press briefing later Friday in Geneva, the World Health Organization expert who led WHO's China mission said the nearly 400-page report was finalized and in the process of being fact-checked and translated.

"I expect that in the next few days, that whole process will be completed and we will be able to release it publicly," WHO expert Peter Ben Embarek said.

At a Biden administration health briefing Friday, U.S. CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said the agency was looking forward to the release of the WHO report.

Dr. Anthony Fauci said the explanation that "most public health officials agree with" about how COVID-19 appeared in humans is that the virus was likely spreading in China below the radar for several weeks, allowing it to be well adapted by the time it was recognized.

The government's top infectious disease expert's comments came in response to speculation by former CDC head Robert Redfield on CNN that COVID-19 came from a lab.

"What he likely was expressing is that there certainly are possibilities ... of how a virus adapts itself to a efficient spread among humans," Fauci said. □

China denounces U.S.-Taiwan coast guard cooperation agreement

BEIJING (AP) — China on Friday denounced an agreement between the U.S. and Taiwanese coast guards that underscores growing ties between Washington and the self-governing island democracy.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying said the pact violated U.S. commitments to China and called on the U.S. to "be cautious with its words and actions on Taiwan-related issues." Hua also attacked support in Congress for a bill calling on Taiwan to be given status at the World Health Organization. Taiwan's seat at the U.N. was handed to

China in 1971.

"We urge the U.S. side to ... refrain from sending any wrong signals to Taiwan independence forces, and refrain from encouraging and inciting Taiwan to expand its so-called international space," Hua told reporters at a daily briefing. The U.S. switched diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China in 1979 but maintains robust economic, political and military ties with the island. Those have grown stronger in recent years as China has upped its threats to use its massive military to annex the island of 24 million, a task Chinese leader

Xi Jinping has said must not be left to future generations.

The sides split amid civil war in 1949 and while China demands eventual political unification under Beijing's rule, most Taiwanese strongly favor the current state of de facto independence amid extensive economic exchanges. U.S. law requires Washington to ensure the island has the ability to defend itself and Taiwan remains among the most sensitive issues in relations with Beijing that are at their lowest level in decades.

This week's agreement also



In this May 4, 2019, file photo, Taiwan Coast Guard ships and a helicopter take part in a search-and-rescue operation during an offshore anti-terrorism drill at a harbor in New Taipei City, Taiwan.

Associated Press

follows China's adoption of a new law authorizing its coast guard to use force in areas that China claims as its own territory, a move seen as potentially raising the possibility for conflict in

surrounding waters. China's coast guard is considered the region's largest and already operates as an extension of its military in asserting China's maritime claims. □

Migrant arrivals to Europe lower but deaths remain high

By RENATA BRITO
Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP)

— The number of migrants and asylum-seekers who reached Europe in 2020 is the lowest it has been in the past decade, according to a report released Friday by the United Nations migration agency. But deaths and disappearances on sea routes remain alarmingly high with only a small fraction of bodies recovered and victims identified. Of the 93,000 people who entered Europe irregularly last year, roughly 92% did so via the Western, Central and Eastern Mediterranean Sea, as well as through the Atlantic Ocean off West Africa to Spain's Canary Islands, often on unseaworthy boats.

Arrivals in the Canaries, considered part of the Schengen area, increased by 750% last year. The numbers had already picked up before the pandemic following tougher border controls and interceptions on the Mediterranean by North African countries, but COVID-19 seems to have "acted as a multiplier of



In this Saturday, Nov. 14, 2020 file photo, a bag containing the body of a migrant who died at sea is placed in a coffin after being disembarked from the Spanish humanitarian rescue ship Open Arms, which was carrying over 200 migrants rescued in the Mediterranean Sea, at the Sicilian port of Trapani, southern Italy.

existing factors motivating migration on this route," the report said.

It added that many migrants previously worked in sectors such as fishing and agriculture that have suffered greatly from the economic consequences of the pandemic.

The sea routes are lethal. The International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants Project has confirmed the death or disappearances of nearly 2,300 people last year. This number is higher than in 2019 when 2,095 victims were recorded and slightly low-

er than in 2018 which had 2,344.

The Central Mediterranean north of Libya saw 984 people perish in 2020. Meanwhile, on the Atlantic route to the Canary Islands, at least 849 victims were recorded — more than four times as many as in any

Associated Press

of the previous six years, according to the report, "Maritime Migration to Europe: Focus on the Overseas Route to the Canary Islands."

The deaths of 300 more Europe-bound asylum-seekers and migrants on the two sea passages have already been documented this year, the IOM said.

In the latest incident in the Canaries, at least three people died Friday after a crowded migrant boat capsized south of the island of Tenerife. Spanish rescuers pulled 41 people from the water with the help of a nearby fishing vessel, and also recovered the bodies of two women and a man, a spokesman with Spain's Maritime Rescue Service said.

The spokesman told The Associated Press that rescuers were looking for more survivors in the ocean.

The International Organization for Migration admits its data is incomplete. So-called "invisible shipwrecks," when entire boats disappear and leave no survivors, are especially concerning. □

Trains crash in southern Egypt, killing at least 32

By NOHA ELHENNAWY
Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Two trains crashed Friday in southern Egypt, killing at least 32 people and injuring 165, authorities said in the latest of a series of deadly accidents on the country's troubled railways.

Someone apparently activated the emergency brakes on the passenger train, and it was rear-ended by another train, causing two cars to derail and flip on their side, Egypt's Railway Authorities said. The passenger train was headed to the Mediterranean port of Alexandria, north of Cairo, the statement said.

Video showed twisted piles of metal with passengers covered with dust trapped inside — some bleeding

and others unconscious. Bystanders removed the dead and laid them on the ground nearby.

One passenger was heard shouting on the video, "Help us! People are dying!" A female passenger appeared to be upside down, squeezed under the seats, and was crying, "Get me out, boy!"

More than 100 ambulances were sent to the scene in the province of Sohag, about 440 kilometers (270 miles) south of Cairo, Health Minister Hala Zayed said, and the injured were taken to four hospitals. Injuries included broken bones, cuts and bruises.

Two planes carrying a total of 52 doctors, mostly surgeons, were sent to Sohag, she added at a news conference in the

province, accompanied by Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouly.

President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi said he was monitoring the situation and that those responsible would receive "a deterrent punishment."

"The pain that tears our hearts today cannot but make us more determined to end this type of disasters," he wrote on his Facebook page.

Egypt's rail system has a history of badly maintained equipment and mismanagement, and official figures said there were 1,793 train accidents in 2017.

In 2018, a passenger train derailed near the southern city of Aswan, injuring at least six people and prompting authorities to



Egyptians look for remains of victims around mangled train carriages at the scene of a train accident in Sohag, Egypt, Friday, March 26, 2021.

Associated Press

fire the chief of the country's railways. The same year, el-Sissi said the government needed about 250 billion Egyptian pounds (\$14.1 billion) to overhaul the rail system. Those remarks came a day after a passenger train collided with a cargo train, killing at least 12 people.

A year earlier, two pas-

ger trains collided just outside Alexandria, killing 43. In 2016, at least 51 people were killed when two commuter trains collided near Cairo.

Egypt's deadliest train crash was in 2002, when over 300 people were killed after fire broke out in a train traveling from Cairo to southern Egypt. □

NGOs: Venezuela military, Colombia rebels continue fighting

By MARKO ÁLVAREZ and

ASTRID SUÁREZ

Associated Press

ARAUQUITA, Colombia (AP)

— Clashes that began over the weekend between Venezuela's military and a Colombian armed group in a community along the nations' shared border have continued, prompting more Venezuelans to seek refuge in a nearby Colombian community, international monitoring groups said Thursday.

Colombian officials said more than 3,900 people have now moved from Venezuela to northeast Colombia, about 800 more than Wednesday. The children and adults are in eight shelters set up to host them. "It was reported that families continue to flee across the border in search of safety as the violence in the area has not completely stopped," said Dominika Arseniuk, the Norwegian Refugee Council's Country Director in Colombia. "People we have spoken with are terrified and fear for their lives."

Venezuelan Defense Min-



Venezuelans carry their belongings after using a boat to cross the Arauca River, the natural border between Venezuela and Colombia, as they arrive to Arauquita, Colombia, Thursday, March 25, 2021.

ister Gen. Vladimir Padrino López confirmed on Monday in a statement that the clashes began Sunday. He said they resulted in the arrests of 32 people, the destruction of six camps and the seizure of weapons, but he did not name the Colombian armed group involved. Human Rights Watch told The Associated Press the armed group involved is the 10th Front,

which is made up of dissidents of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, known by its Spanish acronym FARC. The fighting is taking place in the border state of Apure, Venezuela. A peace deal between the Colombian government and the FARC in 2016 ended five decades of war. But the group has suffered deep divisions, with some of its members

families have had to sleep on small mattresses set up on the ground and on the stands of a space normally used for sporting events.

Marta Orozco, a Venezuelan, said she fled her home in Apure because houses were being looted.

The Colombian government has repeatedly accused Venezuela of harboring members of the National Liberation Army as well as FARC dissidents. Colombia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed its concern for the civilian population and called on the international community "to join in assisting in the face of this humanitarian crisis."

Colombia and Venezuela share about 1,370 miles (2,200 kilometers) of border but have not had diplomatic relations since February 2019 following the decision of President Nicolás Maduro to expel Colombian diplomats. Colombia President Iván Duque does not recognize Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate president and instead supports opposition leader Juan Guaidó. □

Associated Press

Mexican agency bars candidate accused of rape from running

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexico's elections agency has withdrawn ballot registration for a ruling-party state candidate who was nominated despite accusations of rape against him. The decision drew the

wrath Friday of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has defended candidate Félix Salgado and criticized women's groups who objected to his candidacy. "This is an attack on de-

mocracy," Lopez Obrador said, saying that "high powered, mafia interests" wanted Salgado disqualified as candidate for the governorship of southern Guerrero state. "This is anti-democratic."

The National Electoral Institute ruled late Thursday that Salgado had failed to report the money he spent during the primary process, and that his candidacy would no longer be officially recognized.

Mexico will hold state and federal mid-term elections on June 6. Salgado won the nomination of López Obrador's Morena party earlier this month, despite protests by women's rights activists. He has not personally addressed the accusations, though his lawyer has denied them. □



In this Feb. 24, 2021 file photo, women protest against ruling party politician Félix Salgado during a visit by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Argentina's President Alberto Fernandez in Iguala, Mexico.

Associated Press



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Citizen scientists needed to identify local Manta and Devil Rays

ORANJESTAD — DCNA is partnering with the Caribbean Islands Manta Conservation Program, an affiliate project of the Manta Trust, and Observation.org to track local manta rays and devil rays within the Dutch Caribbean. Through individuals reporting their (old and new) sightings and interactions with mantas and devil rays, researchers are hoping to learn more about local populations to shed light on this mysterious species.

Manta Rays and Devil Rays

Manta and devil rays are highly charismatic and have some of the largest brains of all fish species. Although they can be found throughout tropical, subtropical and temperate waters worldwide, they are highly threatened, often victims of fishing. Whether caught as bycatch or targeted for their gill plates, which are valuable on the black market and used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, populations of this species are dwindling, leaving them endangered.

Mantas and devil rays are some of the largest of the ray family, reaching sizes of up to 7 meters wide. Until only a few years ago, manta rays were thought to be a single species of their own genus, but they are now considered to be part of the mobulid genus, along with the devil rays. Two distinct species of manta ray have been identified, yet a third is likely. Oceanic manta rays (*Mobula birostris*) are the largest mobulids and are found worldwide, typically in open ocean water. Reef manta rays (*Mobula alfredi*) are found in the Indian and West Pacific Oceans, more commonly along coastlines and coral reefs. A third species of manta ray, the Caribbean manta ray or *Mobula c.f. birostris* has been proposed, and scientists are working to confirm the distinct species. Caribbean manta rays are likely sympatric to the oceanic manta ray and found in the Atlantic, the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico.

All mobula species are filter feeders, swimming along with their mouths open, sieving out zooplankton and krill from the water. They're known to use creative techniques involving repeated somersaults to create a cyclone effect, trapping their food in the water column. Unlike stingrays, they have no stinger or barb in their tail and are completely harmless to humans. Manta rays and devil rays will always be on the move through the water, as they are ram-ventilators and must continuously swim to run water

over their gills. They can swim very quickly but they can also be quite curious about divers and will often circle around to investigate, especially when divers or snorkelers are calm in the water.

Manta rays often make regular visits to the reef, particularly to known cleaning stations where smaller fish feed off larger fish, removing parasites and dead skin. Knowing these locations and tracking regular visitors can help researchers understand more about mantas' life cycles and migration patterns. Many of the sightings from the Dutch Caribbean have been of feeding manta rays in areas of dense plankton concentration.

Manta rays can be identified as individuals by the unique spot pattern on their ventral side or belly. Using a photograph of these spots, researchers can track individuals over time, perhaps across international borders. Anyone with a camera can take a photo of manta ray and all images are helpful regardless of showing the mantas spot pattern. Even images taken from land or a boat can be helpful in determining seasonal movements and aggregation sites.

Around the islands of the Dutch Caribbean, *Mobula birostris* and *Mobula c.f. birostris* as well as two species of devil ray, *Mobula hypostoma* and *Mobula tarapacana* have been identified. Sightings appear to be infrequent and unpredictable; however, researchers are hoping to learn more with increased data and reports.

Highly Threatened

Although manta rays are long-lived, with expected life spans of 30-50 years, females are slow to sexually mature and tend to only have one pup every two to five years. Threatened by overfishing, these species have seen a drastic decrease in their numbers worldwide. Luckily since 2011, mantas have been protected within international waters by the Convention on Migratory Species as well as a variety of local conservation efforts such as the establishment of the Yarari Sanctuary in the Dutch Caribbean. Much of this has been driven by countries realizing the economic value these species can generate, as many tourists will travel from around the world to see these creatures first hand. In fact, one study estimated that a single ray could generate up to one million dollars in its lifetime.

In 2020, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) changed the status of oceanic



Photo credit: Peter Verhoog/DutchSharkSociety/PEW (all rights reserved)

manta rays from vulnerable to endangered, signifying that they need further conservation worldwide. This species and the putative third species, the Caribbean Manta Ray, are the two most sighted in the Dutch Caribbean waters. It's essential to continue researching these species to protect them and their habitats for the future.

The Project

Together with the Caribbean Islands Manta Conservation Program, an affiliate project of the Manta Trust and Observation.org, DCNA is working to catalog local manta populations and educate residents and visitors about these incredible species. By reporting sightings and interactions with mantas in the Dutch Caribbean, individuals can contribute to this database. Each sighting can be validated using either an automatic or manual method, especially with the manta conservation program staff validating species for Observation.org.

The Manta Trust collects information on manta ray sightings worldwide, and they have now recorded more than 120 encounters throughout the Dutch Caribbean. DCNA and the Caribbean Islands Manta Conservation Program are currently working to build a regional database of ID photos from citizen scientist and researchers. More than 20 individual manta rays have been identified in the Dutch Caribbean, and lucky photographers have named some of these individuals. Recently, Caribbean manta rays from Bonaire were named Caicai (reported by Bas Tol) and Ari (reported by Arinae Scharpenberg). In Aruba, an oceanic manta ray was named Dushi (reported by Danielle de Kool and Rudolf Ulloa). If you are the first to

photograph the spot pattern of a manta ray and submit it for the database, you'll also be given the opportunity to name the manta.

Report your sightings

Please report any sightings or photos (new or old) you have of manta rays, or any other unique species on <https://dutchcaribbean.observation.org>. The current goal is to increase data collection to highlight multiple sightings of individuals and to determine what areas mantas tend to revisit. With increased submissions, researchers hope to determine whether there are any aggregation sites or seasonal patterns of sightings around the Caribbean islands. Observation.org and DCNA will share your photos with Manta Trust researchers; however you can also submit your photos and videos from anywhere in the world directly to <https://www.mantatrust.org/idthemanta>, an international manta tracking database of the Manta Trust.

If you prefer, or for more information regarding your sighting, you can email photos or videos (make sure to include the date and location) to nicole.pelletier@manta-trust.org. Photos can also be sent through the Caribbean Islands Manta Conservation Program social media pages on Facebook and Instagram. If uploading images to social media, particularly Instagram, tag #Caribbeanislandsmanta in your uploads to make sure these images are easily found and included in the global database.

We look forward to hearing about your encounters and learning more about these incredible species in the Dutch Caribbean.

For more information go to <https://www.dcnanature.org>. □

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Unique training for marines at an American training location

SAVANETA — Dutch marines from the Caribbean have undergone an intensive and special exercise. For the past 3 weeks, they trained in the United States at Camp LeJeune in North Carolina, among other things such as helicopters and planes. They worked together with the American colleagues. Marines from 32 Raiding Squadron Aruba and Detachment St. Maarten were guests of II Marine Expeditionary Forces in North Carolina. There they had the opportunity to practice at the unique training location Camp LeJeune. For example, they could train at squadron level in urban areas with helicopters and airplanes which are capabilities that they don't have in the Caribbean.

Challenges

The different environment



presented completely new challenges, Captain Mark Brouwer, exchange officer in the US saw.

"Think of interoperability with communication systems and the exchange of intelligence from command structures. These challenges only emerge during implementation."

The Dutch and American Marines train several times a year. This is not only to emphasize the strong bonds, but also to exchange experiences. "It is educational to train with allies. They always hold up a mirror to you", Brouwer emphasizes.

Worth it

Exercise Caribbean Urban Warrior 21 was instructive in that respect, says Major Dennis van Huizen, commander of the exercise unit.

"The integration with means of transport and reconnaissance teams was an absolute advantage. This was very rewarding. I am very happy that we were able to do this exercise in these uncertain times."

The Dutch troops are currently preparing to return to their home base. Because of COVID-19, they were quarantined in advance and tested extensively. □

From fashion to music to a magical Aruban reality

ORANJESTAD — The art world both globally as locally has been devastated by the economic downfall of the current covid-19 pandemic reality. However our creatives are finding solutions and means of cooperatively still evoking a hopeful means to dream up an inspiring existence. Using online platforms effectively to still engage with their audience. If anything the time at home has allowed marvelous projects to brew into existence. One of these local projects that we are pleased to introduce today is called ANEMOIA, created by emerging artist Darwin Winklaar, who just graduated with honors from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, Amsterdam.

Withholding the best dissertation from the department of fashion design. Darwin is a multidisciplinary artist. Working across disciplines and launching his musical debut under the artistic name "NIÑO DIVINO" which translates to "THE DIVINE CHILD", where he gives homage to his childhood memories especially being raised in Aruba's multicultural city San Nicolas.

Through the compilation of six songs from which four of them will be represented in music films he retells the story of his childhood memories and the domestic religious habits of the women who raised him. ANEMOIA, represents nostalgia for a time you never knew. Acknowledging what happens behind closed doors; Aruba's domestic realm and working class situation, the influence of machismo in our culture and however detrimental that maybe the empowerment encountered by embodying the feminine energy through a more inclusive queer representation. Honoring these female entities and their folk religious mythologies, 'Niño Divino' comes to life through the magical lens of our folkloric religious heritage and our urban contemporary art scene. Especially through



the cultural influences of San Nicolas as the district that raised him.

Darwin is very much inspired by his mother Violeta and tells us how he got inspired by her religious practices; "As an Aruban born and bred artist I always felt connected to the practice of romanticizing my childhood memories. Feeling the intense need to give an homage to the saint who I see and thus depict in the mother who raised me, namely Violeta.

Family, the domestic domain, and specifically the female entities and their religiosity, spiritual practices always enticed me. A vivid memory that shaped me was witnessing my mother performing her cathartic cleansing rituals while making her altars every Sunday, as part of her household duties. She did that to give homage to the saints, an-

gels and deities that guide her and protect her; this is the heart of my project.

AMMONIA is a strong liquid, used to clean, sometimes, it can be so strong that it makes you lose sense of reality, pass out, an amnesia effect comes to be. The liquid ammonia is so strong that you have to mix it with different other liquids such as: Blouse, Florida water or even lemon. In most of the Aruban households they would use ammonia when they feel specific bad energy or curse around their house or in their home. Thus these hybrid practices of spirituality; doused in the Afro-religious and Catholic heritage as it exists plentifully in the Caribbean became a source of inspiration for me. I was mesmerized by these practices of faith that connected deeply with the emotions and hardships I witnessed as a child. It became a female centered way of manifesting power and enabling a constant state of forgiveness.

My mother is the main reason behind me venturing upon a fashion career at the Gerrit Rietveld Academy. Delving and experimenting with unconventional materials, while always feeling the need to constantly innovate and thus bring into life: The Aru-

ban Couture.

From there on fashion was an outlet for me. It allowed me to bring to life this persona that honors the creative Aruban identity which I call 'Niño Divino'. He lives in the magical realm where music, singing and performance meets a multi-disciplinary existence. Celebrating and thus bringing into existence a new contemporary genre which I refer to 'Folkloric Religion or NEO-Folklore'.

Niño Divino, performs and thus sings and dances in-between nostalgia and melancholia. For the past years I've been walking by foot cultivating as much information possible of my heritage in order to present my new up and coming projects.

I am challenging myself as an artist by pioneering a new genre and expanding my expertise outside of the fashion design field into the multi-disciplinary. I will present this in my first EP, that debuts me as an artist/conceptual designer and musician that is creating this neo-folklore reality. The project is called "ANEMOIA".

San Nicolas is the epicenter of industrial progress which

has offered us a melting pot of cultural influences. By embodying all of these influences and translating it into a new reality. Darwin is honoring the very essence of our Caribbean heritage.

Darwin is also one of the finalist of Lichting 2020. Lichting is the beating heart of Amsterdam Fashion Week. The concept of 'Lichting' is simple: the best academy graduates of one year in one central catwalk show. In the audience are the 700 most important people for the next step in their careers: fashion journalists and influential stylists, ready to spot the next big thing; CEO's and design managers on the look-out for talent; and the all-important players-behind-the-scenes, all eager to see what the nation's academies have brought forth this year.

Support this beautiful project that gives a whole new artistic dimension of Aruba by donating at Darwin's GoFundme campaign: <https://gofund.me/f22d0f38>

More information on this you will find on Youtube: <https://youtu.be/P3-QEDgqQ8M>. □



EXPLAINER: What's a SPAC, the latest craze on Wall Street?

By KEN SWEET
AP Business Writer

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP)

— WeWork will finally go public this year, allowing investors to buy and sell its shares. But not through a traditional IPO.

In the two years since the office-sharing company's failed IPO, a new way to launch a stock on Wall Street has become fashionable: SPACs.

Special purpose acquisition companies have been embraced by big institutions and small-pocketed investors alike. Celebrities and famous athletes have endorsed them.

SPACs have raised more than \$96.5 billion in less than three months so far this year. That tops the \$83.3 billion raised in all of last year, which itself was six times bigger than the prior year, according to SPACInsider. Well-known companies such as DraftKings and Virgin Galactic used a SPAC to go public last year. "I didn't take them seriously until I saw the momentum," said Susan Winter, head of global loan syndications at Silicon Valley Bank.

Lately, however, banks, regulators and some investors are taking a more cautious look at these red-hot investments. Critics point to risks inherent in how SPACs are constructed, while others see the maniacal fervor for them as one sign of a bubble in the stock market.

WHAT'S A SPAC?

SPACs are publicly traded but have no real business. A SPAC is essentially just a pile of investors' cash. The goal is to use those millions of dollars to take a private company public without using the traditional initial public offering process that's been around for decades.

Billionaire hedge fund investor Bill Ackman raised \$4 billion last year for his own SPAC, known as Tontine Capital. Chamath Palihapitiya, an early Facebook employee and chairman of Social Capital, has multiple SPACs and is using one to take SoFi, the online financial services startup, public later this year.

WHY ARE THEY SO POPULAR?

SPACs sell shares to the public, typically at \$10

ment bank, produce mountains of materials for investors to scrutinize, eventually talk to potential investors in

sponsors a reason to make a deal, regardless of whether it truly makes financial sense for both the compa-

public until it actually buys another company.

A spokeswoman at UBS declined to comment.

WHAT DO REGULATORS SAY?

The frenzy surrounding SPACs has also attracted the attention of government regulators, who are concerned they may draw in unsophisticated investors.

The Securities and Exchange Commission released a report in December outlining the pros and cons of investing in SPACs, in which it cautioned investors about the potential conflicts involving the SPAC's management.

Last week, the SEC put out a bulletin warning investors not to base their investing decisions solely on whether a celebrity or star athlete has endorsed the product.

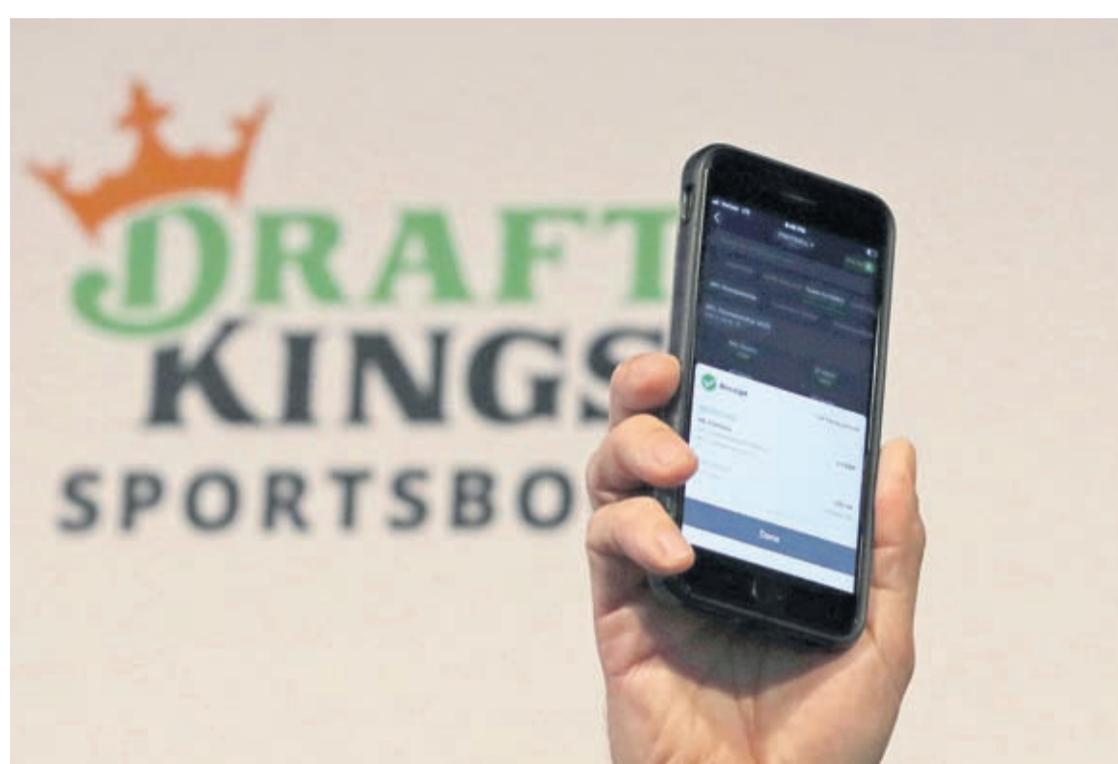
The SPAC acquiring WeWork, BowX Acquisition, lists Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal as an adviser. Other athletes such as Alex Rodriguez and Stephen Curry have endorsed SPACs or put their own money into a SPAC entity. Former Trump economic advisor Larry Kudlow has also created a SPAC.

"It is never a good idea to invest in a SPAC just because someone famous sponsors or invests in it or says it is a good investment," the SEC bluntly said.

HOW HAVE SPACS PERFORMED?

After posting some eye-popping gains in 2020, SPACs have come back to earth. An exchange-traded fund consisting of SPACs and companies taken public through SPAC acquisitions, the Defiance Next Gen SPAC fund, jumped 55% between early November and mid-February. It has since dropped from around \$35 to \$27 and is down 6.7% so far this year compared to the 4.9% return of the S&P 500.

The declines come as the prospects for an improving economy and a pickup in inflation have driven investors to move money away from some high-flying parts of the market, such as technology stocks. □



In this Dec. 30, 2019 file photo, New Hampshire Gov. Chris Sununu shows his receipt after placing the first legal sports wagering bet on his mobile phone in Manchester, N.H.

Associated Press

apiece, and then set out to find their target. That low entry price can allow small-fry investors to invest in some young companies that previously would have been accessible only to the wealthy and venture capitalists.

According to a recent report from BofA Global Research, 40% of SPAC trading on BofA's platform from July to December of 2020 was driven by retail investors, compared to just 21% of stock trading for both the S&P 500 and the Russell 2000.

"It used to be that we would see a new SPAC every week, or every two weeks. Now we are seeing four SPAC listings a week," said Harris Arch, a co-portfolio manager of the DuPont Capital Merger Arbitrage Strategy fund.

For companies, a merger with a SPAC provides a quicker timeline for going public and fewer disclosure requirements. When the SPAC acquires a target, the acquired company takes the SPAC's spot on an exchange and typically gets a new stock ticker. A traditional IPO requires a company to hire an invest-

what's known in Wall Street parlance as a "road show," and then if everything lines up correctly go public.

IPOs get derailed all the time, however. The required disclosures may reveal some unattractive financials, which happened with WeWork two years ago, or the timing might not work, perhaps because the stock market is too volatile at the moment.

WHAT'S NOT TO LIKE?

The game is often stacked in favor of the SPAC's management, also referred to as the "sponsors," and initial investors.

Management has a financial incentive to find an acquisition target most often management receives a 20% stake in the newly public company. They also get shares in the new company at a significant discount to the value the company agrees to use to go public, which can dilute the value of the shares held by retail investors.

Further, each SPAC has its own expiration date, typically two years from its creation, after which the funds of the SPAC must be returned to its investors.

All these factors give SPAC

ny and the investors, critics say. Investors do get a say on management's acquisition target, voting it up or down, but SPAC investors often consist of Wall Street banks and the SPACs own sponsors, which may stack the deck in favor of a "yes" vote.

Also since SPAC target companies bypass the traditional IPO process and all the checks and due diligence that comes from it companies that may not be fully ready to go public are now being listed on stock exchanges.

Since investors do not know the target company ahead of time, SPACs are sometimes referred to as "blank check companies." It's this "blank check" issue that has given some on Wall Street pause.

Swiss bank UBS has directed its financial advisors to only recommend SPACs to eligible clients if the bank is an underwriter and therefore has sufficient information about the company to make a recommendation, according to people familiar with the matter. That's because there is limited information about a SPAC generally available to the

How two friends made art history buying a \$70M digital work

By MATT O'BRIEN and KEL-

VIN CHAN

AP Technology Writers

It took a few minutes for Vignesh Sundaresan and Anand Venkateswaran to realize that they'd parted with \$69.3 million for a digital artwork stored in a JPEG file, coincidentally securing their place in art history.

"We weren't sure we won," said Venkateswaran, describing the nerve-wracking final moments of the online auction for a collage of 5,000 images by the artist known as Beeple. "We kept refreshing the page."

The March 11 auction at Christie's in London immediately made Beeple's artwork one of the most expensive pieces ever sold by living artists, joining a well-known swimming pool painting by David Hockney and an iconic stainless steel rabbit sculpture by Jeff Koons. Venkateswaran said he and his friend and business partner, Sundaresan, both in their 30s, are still coming to terms with their landmark purchase. They've also had to cope with outside concerns that the transaction could have been a convoluted scheme to inflate the value of the pair's investment portfolio.

That's because Venkateswaran and Sundaresan have invested heavily in a new form of digital collectible with the unwieldy name of non-fungible tokens, or NFTs. Based on cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain, these digital items function as exclusive certificates of authenticity, making it possible to turn easily copied digital files into unique collectibles—sometimes ones worth tens of millions of dollars.

The Beeple sale broke a record for the most expensive NFT ever sold and kick-started a global conversation about NFTs, their value and whether they are a lasting addition to the digital landscape. But the eye-popping sum involved drew global headlines and some suspicions that it could have been engineered for the publicity



This undated family handout photo shows NFT investor Anand Venkateswaran, known by his online pseudonym Twobadour, in Chennai, India.

Associated Press

that drew more attention to NFTs, which could boost the value of the pair's existing holdings.

The involvement of Christie's, a centuries-old auction house, should be sufficient to reassure skeptics, Venkateswaran said in a call from his home in southern India. "I think the bigger problem here is that people thought this would be impossible."

That's certainly the case with Beeple himself, who in real life is a digital artist named Mike Winkelmann. "This whole NFT thing was not something I saw coming, at all," he said. During the auction, the artist was in his living room near Charleston, South Carolina, surrounded by family and a video crew, and said it felt like a "bomb went off in the room" as the bids quickly rose. Another bidder and cryptocurrency entrepreneur, Justin Sun, lost in the final seconds after the bids exceeded his previously set maximum.

The NFT market was already taking off, with transactions last year quadrupling to \$250 million, according to a report by NonFungible.com, a website that tracks the market. The Beeple sale turbocharged that growth and helped transform NFTs from niche tokens mainly

appealing to cryptocurrency nerds to a new type of digital asset that's drawn mainstream attention from the art world, the music industry, sports and speculators.

Not to be outdone, auction house rival Sotheby's plans its own NFT sale, collaborating with the pseudonymous digital artist Pak in a sale next month.

Winkelmann began seeing the possibilities of NFTs for digital artists back in October when he tested the waters with an initial "drop" of his work. "People can actually own my art and collect it and, you know, pay good money," he said in an interview this week.

It was after another sale late last year that he reached out to one of the losing bidders, Sundaresan, who uses the pseudonym Metakovan.

The art world was not a common talking point for Sundaresan and Venkateswaran when they first met in 2013 while working at The Hindu, a daily newspaper in Chennai, India. Sundaresan was a 20-something technology consultant; Venkateswaran was a journalist.

Both had humble upbringings. Sundaresan couldn't afford a laptop when he was learning to code, so

he'd walk around with a flash drive and borrow his friends' laptops, Venkateswaran said.

But by 2020, Sundaresan, now living in Singapore, had made himself rich on a series of cryptocurrency ventures and investments. With Sundaresan's money and Venkateswaran's analytical eye, they began exploring NFTs with a new fund called Metapurse.

Sundaresan, who declined to be interviewed this week, created the persona Metakovan as a reference to his affection for virtual worlds known as the "metaverse." The name means "King of Meta" in the Tamil language. Venkateswaran, who lives in Chennai with his wife and two kids, calls himself Twobadour. In a blog post last week the pair revealed their true identities and sought to dispel some of the mystery about their motivations.

"The point was to show Indians and people of color that they too could be patrons, that crypto was an equalizing power between the West and the Rest, and that the global south was rising," they wrote.

It was in December that the Metapurse pair made their first big Beeple investment, buying 20 of his works for \$2.2 million and gifting the

artist with 2% of their new fund of NFT tokens, called B20s, that were designed to allow large groups of people to share ownership of an art piece.

That was the precursor to March's historic sale of Beeple's "Everydays: the First 5000 Days," a digital file combining works Beeple had created each day from May 2007 to the beginning of this year. Many of them are grotesque and cartoonish takes on what was happening in U.S. politics or pop culture. The works also follow Beeple's rise from a little-known graphic designer to an internet personality with a big Instagram following and multimedia projects with pop stars like Nicki Minaj and Justin Bieber.

"If you look at each picture at face value, obviously not all of them are going to stand the test of time," Venkateswaran said. "Not all 5,000 are masterpieces. That was never the argument. Not everything that Beeple puts out is gold. We don't worship at his feet. That's not what we were about. This is more about the combined narrative of what he represents."

"A lot of the art market is saying, 'I own something unique, it's scarce, I own it, look at me.' This is not that different," she said. "The whole value of an NFT is being able to say this is an original. You're buying the bragging rights to say, 'I own the token.' But really, anyone can access the art."

Amineddoleh said the blockchain technology that underpins NFTs and other cryptocurrency markets also provides a transparent ledger to record art transactions. But for skeptics of the largely unregulated world of cryptocurrency, the sale has invited added scrutiny.

Christie's declined to comment on the details of the sale's financial structure except to say that the total amount was paid in a cryptocurrency known as Ether, marking Christie's first time accepting cryptocurrency as payment. □

Science panel: Consider air cooling tech as climate back-up

By SETH BORENSTEIN
AP Science Writer

The U.S. must seriously consider the idea of tinkering with the atmosphere to cool a warming Earth and accelerate research into how and whether humanity should hack the planet, the National Academy of Sciences said Thursday. The report by the academy, set up by Abraham Lincoln to provide the government with expert advice, doesn't recommend carrying out solar geoengineering to bounce heat back to space. At least not yet.

But an emergency plan needs to be explored, the report says, because climate change-driven extreme weather has worsened since the last time the academy looked at the highly-charged issue in 2015. That requires coordinated research into whether air-tinkering technology would work, its potentially dangerous side effects, its ethics and the potential for political fall-out.

The report looks at three possible ways to cool the air: Putting heat-reflecting particles in the stratosphere, changing the brightness of ocean clouds and thinning high clouds.

"Climate engineering is a really dumb idea, but it might not be as dumb as doing nothing at this point or continuing to do what we've been doing," Scripps Institution of Oceanography atmospheric chemist Lynn Russell, a report co-author, told The Associated Press. "It has a lot of risks and those are important to learn as much as we can about."

The panel recommended ramping up research



This March 2021 photo provided by researcher Yomay Shur shows a gondola at a Harvard University facility in Cambridge, Mass., which will be tested on a balloon over Sweden for eventual possible use in releasing sunlight-reflecting aerosols into the Earth's atmosphere.

Associated Press

spending by several fold with "exit ramps" to end to \$40 million a year, along study if an unacceptable

Conceptis Sudoku

By Dave Green

	7			8		3	
				5			
3	9				2	8	
6	2	8	1				
		7	6		5	9	
9	5				7	3	
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Review: In 'Tina,' the final word from a legendary survivor

By JAKE COYLE

AP Film Writer

In the opening moments of the HBO documentary "Tina," Tina Turner doesn't just command the stage as she's belting out "Ask Me How I Feel" for a giant stadium of fans. With heels stomping and her hair waving, she owns the stage to such a degree that you half expect bank lenders to materialize by the footlights to sign over the deed. Few if any could ever match Turner as a performer. Both regal and raw, she was one of the supreme vocalists of the 20th century — a model of inspiration for Mick Jagger and countless others.

And, at least in scenes like that 1980s concert, her power was a testament of reclamation. As a newly solo singer removed from more than a decade of abuse, she was taking back her life, her story, her voice. Her proper debut, she says, came not as a teenager with Ike Turner, but as a 50-year-old woman finally on her own.

The story has rightly taken on the shine of legend. The remarkable arc of Turner's life has already been the stuff of a best-selling autobiography (1986's "I, Tina"), a Hollywood biopic (1993's "What's Love Got to Do With It") and a Broadway show ("Tina: The Tina Turner Musical"). So why more? Well, partly because music documentaries have proliferated during the streaming era. Everyone from Billie Eilish to Linda Ronstadt has recent-



This image released by HBO shows Tina Turner performing in 1973, from the documentary "Tina."

Associated Press

ly gotten in on the act. But there's a better reason for "Tina," Dan Lindsay and T. J. Martin's new documentary, premiering Saturday on HBO and HBO Max. The film, as you would expect, walks us again through the tremendous upheavals in Turner's life. But it's ultimately about Turner telling her story — why she struggles having to tell it; why she needs to tell it, anyway; and why she wants to be done with it. Turner may be the protagonist of a drama with great swings between oppression and liberation, but it's not a role she has any natural affinity for. "I just really don't want to play the part," she says in an earlier interview heard in "Tina," referencing the 1993 movie. "It was just so unlike me, my life."

That gives "Tina" an unusual tension. In a way, Turner

rejects her own biography. Not the facts of it, but the emphasis on certain chapters. The 81-year-old Turner, who gave her support to the documentary, appears in modern-day interviews from Switzerland where she seems content to put much of it to bed. This, we're meant to gather, may be her final word on her life story. With archival footage and interviews, "Tina" first plunges back to her years in the Ike & Tina Turner Revue. The contrast between their stage presence and private life is drastic. Before crowds and cameras, they're a sensational, exuberant rock and R&B duo; behind closed doors, he's an abusive, controlling monster. Turner, then Annie Mae Bullock, was 17 when she met Ike, a rock 'n' roll pioneer. In their television appearances, he seems

the quiet, supportive side-man. Few beside Turner knew that off-stage he was a thin-skinned tyrant. It's especially telling that next to Ike, Phil Spector comes off like a more sensitive collaborator when they record 1966's "River Deep — Mountain High" with him. (It's one of the disappointingly few but always rewarding times the filmmakers pause to linger on a recording session.) When Turner finally left him, in 1976, she was happy to let Ike have everything but the stage name her gave her years before. The comeback story begins but with it comes with Turner's own struggles with how to be frank about the abuse while not being defined by it. It's easy to understand her desire to tell the truth. Appearing on "Hollywood Squares," host Peter Marshall greets her:

"Tina, where's Ike?"

Turner first went on the record in a 1981 People magazine article, calling Ike's treatment "torture" and that she was "living a life of death." A few years later, plagued by reporters' questions, she wrote her book, with MTV's Kurt Loder, in hopes of moving on. (Loder is an especially good source in the film; an audio recording of his talks with Turner in which she emotionally discusses her mother is perhaps the only truly intimate, unguarded moment in the film.)

The book didn't work, in a way. It only made Turner's past — and her laudable, influential public confrontation with it — all the more attached to her. But by the time of her comeback record, 1984's enormously popular "Private Dancer" with the hit "What's Love Got to Do With It," Turner's defiant, show-stopping performances spoke for themselves. Here, the filmmakers smartly let some of the footage play at length. This is the heart of Turner's legacy. This is the real Tina. But marveling at Turner sing Ann Peebles' "I Can't Stand the Rain," you also realize — despite the filmmakers' best efforts — how unknowable she is. Certainly Turner — long happily married to a German music executive and living in Europe — doesn't want to explain herself any longer. It's probably enough to see all her ambition, pain and perseverance right there on the stage. □

O'Farrell's 'Hamnet' wins book critics award for fiction



Author Maggie O'Farrell poses for the media at the Costa book awards in London on Jan. 25, 2011.

Associated Press

By HILLEL ITALIE

AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Maggie O'Farrell's "Hamnet," an imagined take on the death of Shakespeare's son from the bubonic plague, has won the National Book Critics Circle prize for fiction. "Hamnet," an unfortunately well timed story for the current pandemic, explores the impact of the boy's illness and death on his family. He was Shakespeare's only son, and scholars have long speculated about his influence — if any — on "Hamlet," which Shakespeare worked on in the years following Hamnet's death. Tom Zoellner's "Island on Fire: The Revolt That Ended Slavery in the British Empire" won for nonfiction, and Amy Stanley's "Stranger in the Shogun's City: A Japanese Woman and Her World" was the winner in biography. The autobiography award

went to Cathy Park Hong for "Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning." □

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Difficulty Level ★★★★

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3/27

Sabres begin overhaul by trading Eric Staal to Canadiens

By JOHN WAWROW AP
Hockey Writer

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The Buffalo Sabres' overhaul has begun, with the spiraling team trading veteran center Eric Staal to the Montreal Canadiens on Friday. Buffalo acquired the Canadiens' third and fifth-round selections in the 2021 draft. The Sabres also agreed to retain \$1.625 million, which represents half of the final year of Staal's salary. Staal is a 17-year veteran, who can provide the Canadiens a late-season boost to their playoff hopes. Staal won't be able to join the team immediately because he will have to first go into a minimum seven-day self-quarantine under Canadian health regulations for those traveling from outside the country.

Montreal is 2-2-2 in its past six and 14-8-9 overall. With 37 points, the Canadiens sit fourth in the North Division, two ahead of Vancouver and four up on Calgary. The Sabres, by comparison, are in sell-off mode.

The move comes a day after the Sabres extended their franchise-worst winless skid to 16 games with a 4-0 loss at Pittsburgh. Buffalo, which plays at Boston on Saturday, is 0-14-2 in its past 16, which marks the NHL's longest streak since the Penguins went 0-17-1 during the 2003-04 season. The Sabres have a league-low six wins and been shut out seven times this season,

while all but mathematically in position to extend their playoff drought to a NHL record-matching 10th season.

Staal is expected to be but the first of several Sabres on the move before the NHL's trade deadline on April 12. Forward Taylor Hall, signed in October to a one-year, \$8 million contract, acknowledged following the loss at Pittsburgh that he would be open to waiving his no-trade clause. Others on the trade block include defensemen Brandon Montour and Colin Miller. The Sabres were informed of Staal being traded following practice in Boston, forward Kyle Okposo said. "We just got off the ice to go wish him well. He's a character guy," Okposo said, while acknowledging more moves are likely coming. "It's pretty obvious. I mean, nobody's native here. Everybody knows what's going on with the situation that we're in."

Buffalo acquired the 36-year-old Staal in a trade that sent forward Marcus Johansson to Minnesota in September. It was the first trade completed by Sabres GM Kevyn Adams, who took over after Jason Botterill was fired in June.

Adams was teammates with Staal on the Carolina Hurricanes' 2006 Stanley Cup championship team. Staal was targeted to address Buffalo's need for a second-line center, and added experienced lead-



Pittsburgh Penguins' Kris Letang (58) tries to keep Buffalo Sabres' Eric Staal (12) on the ice during the second period of an NHL hockey game Thursday, March 25, 2021, in Pittsburgh.

Associated Press

ership to a team with a reputation of being fragile. A 12-time 20 goal scorer, who scored 42 as recently as the 2017-18 season in Minnesota, Staal has managed just three goals and 10 points in 32 games, and hasn't scored in his past 23. Staal's 439 career goals

rank fifth among active players, and 68th overall, after moving ahead of Pavel Bure, Gary Roberts and Rick Nash this season. His 1,031 career points rank seventh among active players and 80th overall, one short of matching former Sabres star Alexander Mogilny.

Selected by Carolina with the No. 2 pick in the 2003 draft, Staal spent his first 11-plus seasons with the Hurricanes. He played a 20-game stint with the New York Rangers to close the 2015-16 season, and then joined Minnesota. □



Naomi Osaka of Japan returns to Ajla Tomljanovic of Australia during the Miami Open tennis tournament, Friday, March 26, 2021, in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Associated Press

By STEVEN WINE
AP Sports Writer

MIAMI (AP) — Naomi Osaka might never hit a worse

Moving on at Miami: Osaka has won 22 consecutive matches

shot. Not that it mattered. The world's No. 2-ranked woman shanked a serve that sailed over her opponent's head, but shook off the mishit to win her 22nd match in a row Friday, beating Ajla Tomljanović 7-6 (3), 6-4 in the second round at the Miami Open. Serving into the sun in the final game, Osaka clunked her shot off the lip of her racket, blooping the ball past an astonished

Tomljanović. "That was actually kind of funny when I got past my frustration," Osaka said. "The sun was like on top of a cloud, and it gave off this really weird glare effect. It was kind of my fault for being stubborn and not trying to catch my toss and wait it out." Other serves were much better — Osaka hit 13 aces. She hasn't lost in more than a year, and her winning streak includes her

fourth Grand Slam title at the Australian Open last month.

She needs only one more victory for her best showing in five appearances in Miami, where she has historically made early exits.

"I don't think there's too much you can read into them," Osaka said. "I think there's always a reason I haven't done well here, and hopefully I'm able to do well this time." □

The right man for the job: Mattingly takes root in Miami

By STEVEN WINE

AP Sports Writer

MIAMI (AP) — The former New York Yankees' American League batting champion knows his place now is in the dugout.

As manager of the Miami Marlins, Don Mattingly finds it easy to resist any temptation to step to the plate and show his pitchers who he is—or was.

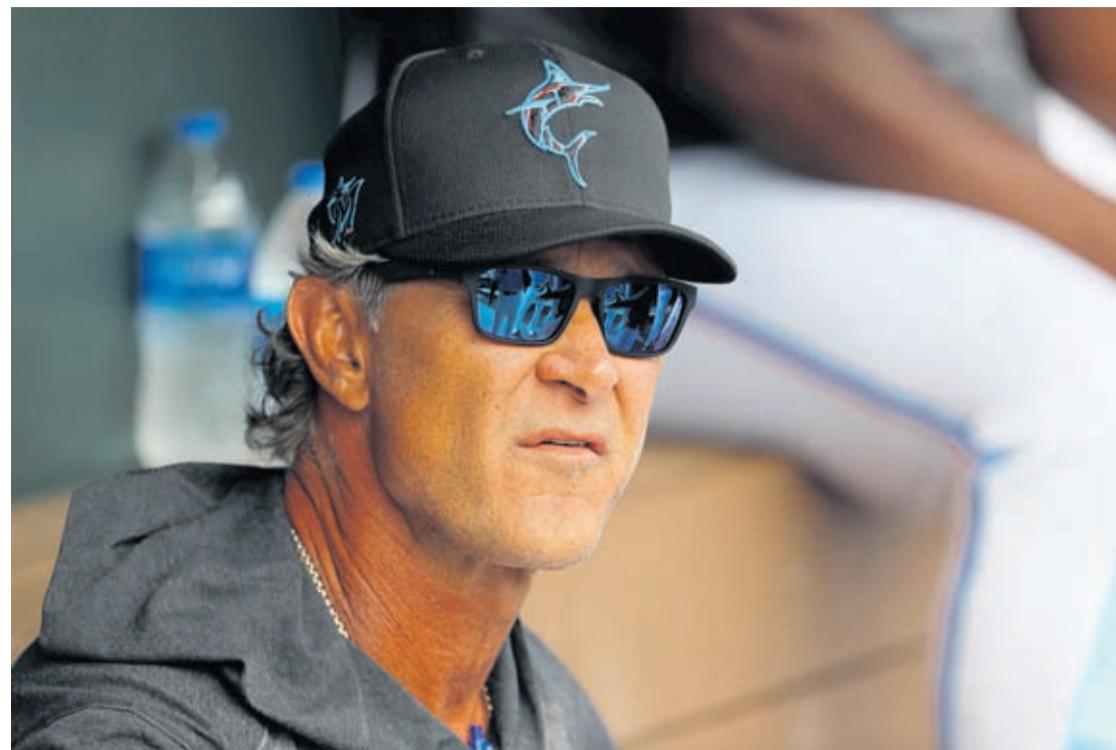
"And try and hit them?" Mattingly says, sounding slightly horrified by the idea. "No. No, no, no. No trying to hit."

"I do step in a lot during bullpens, when we're trying to see if a guy has changed, if he's working on something. But trying to hit? No chance."

Like most 59-year-olds, Mattingly knows his limitations. He has been dealing with many of them as the Marlins' manager since 2016.

Their perennially small payroll makes it tough to win, and in Mattingly's first four seasons in Miami, the loss total rose each year—from 82 to 85 to 98 to 105. That would get most skipper fired.

But while there has been heavy organizational turnover since Derek Jeter's group bought the Marlins in late 2017, he kept Mattingly. That decision paid off last year, when the Marlins made an improbable run to their first playoff berth since 2003 and then swept



Miami Marlins manager Don Mattingly looks on from the dugout prior to a spring training baseball game against the Washington Nationals in Jupiter, Fla., in this Tuesday, March 10, 2020, file photo.

Associated Press

the Chicago Cubs in the first round before losing to Atlanta.

Mattingly made the most of a patchwork roster ravaged by an early-season coronavirus outbreak, and the Marlins finished above .500 even though they were outscored by 41 runs. He was chosen National League Manager of the Year, and baseball applauded.

"The entire industry knows what Donnie brings to the table—extreme baseball intelligence and sheer class," Yankees general manager Brian Cashman says. "The Marlins went through a re-

building process, and that's tough to deal with. What he was able to accomplish last year was pretty special. I think there were a lot of people who were really happy for him, having to walk through some fire to get where they got."

Mattingly's playing career coincided with a rare Yankees title drought. He subsequently managed the Los Angeles Dodgers to three consecutive first-place finishes in the NL West, but went 8-11 in the postseason with them.

So he has never reached the World Series as a player, coach or manager.

The Marlins might still be at least a year or two away from serious contention, but their refurbished farm system now ranks among baseball's best, with an enviable stockpile of promising young pitchers and outfielders.

For now, Mattingly's job remains to nurture young talent so an underfinanced team can overachieve. He considers his ability to relate to players one of his strengths, perhaps because he was an overachiever himself.

"As far as communicating with players, I've always felt pretty comfortable with

that part of it," Mattingly says. "I experienced a lot in my playing days, coming up not as a high draft pick. I had to work my way through."

"I got to the big leagues pretty young, and had that relationship with older players. Then I evolved into a pretty good player, and there were the things that come with that, like the contracts. So you feel like you experienced a lot."

A 19th-round pick by the Yankees, Mattingly reached the majors at 21 in 1982. He won a batting title in 1984, was an All-Star first baseman for six consecutive years and finished with a career average of .307 in 14 seasons.

"He sees the game about as well as anybody I've been around," Marlins hitting coach Eric Duncan says. "Somebody who did it as well as he did, he knows what goes into the preparation side, and how important it is to build relationships and trust with guys."

Shortstop Miguel Rojas, who has played for Mattingly for six seasons in Los Angeles and Miami, praised his manager's even-keel disposition and focus on preparation.

"And remember, he was a really good player who can help you with a lot of different parts of the game," Rojas says. "He's not just putting a lineup together." □

Cavs buy out Drummond, center eyes signing with contender



Cleveland Cavaliers' Andre Drummond (3) drives to the basket against Milwaukee Bucks' Bobby Portis (9) in the second half of an NBA basketball game in Cleveland, in this Saturday, Feb. 6, 2021, file photo.

Associated Press

By TOM WITHERS

AP Sports Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Center Andre Drummond is now a free agent and can sign with a contending team after reaching a buyout with the Cavaliers.

Drummond, who hasn't played since mid-February, began negotiating terms of the buyout with the Cavs on Thursday after the club didn't trade the 27-year-old before the deadline.

The agreement ends a partnership that became awkward when the Cavs benched Drummond to

give young center Jarrett Allen more playing time.

Despite losing his role with the team, Drummond, a two-time All-Star with Detroit before coming to Cleveland last year, stayed engaged with his teammates and didn't become a distraction.

He often sat among the Cavs coaches during games, offering tips and encouragement. "I want to thank Andre for his contributions to our team both on and off the court, and for his professionalism and mutual cooperation as we navigated through

this process with him and his representation," said general manager Koby Altman. "We have great respect for Andre as a person and a player here in Cleveland and we are happy to have reached an outcome that is in the best interest of both Andre and our team."

One of the NBA's top rebounders and a proven scorer, Drummond, who was under contract for \$28.7 million this season, is expected to draw interest from several teams, including the Brooklyn Nets and Los Angeles Lakers. □